

CRIMINAL JUSTICE DATA BOOK

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Prison and Jail Usage in Washington State

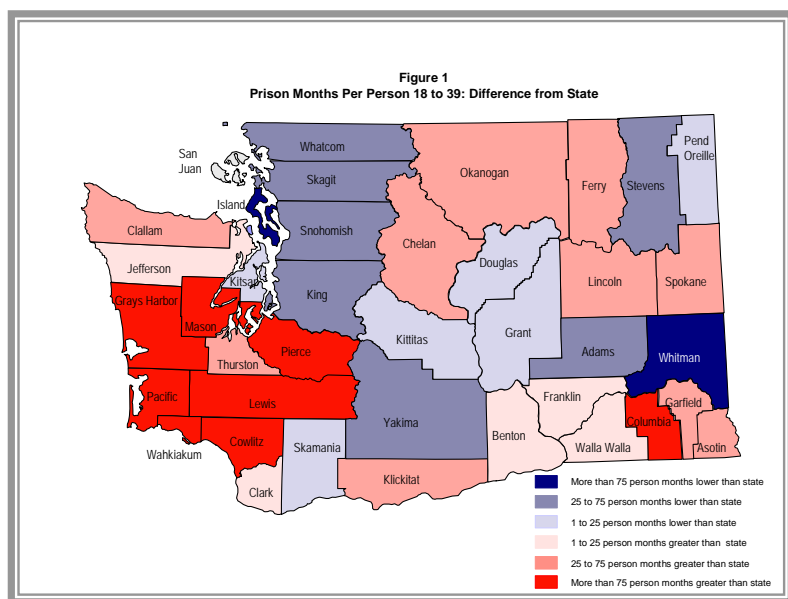
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Introduction

The Sentencing Reform Act of 1981 governs all adult felony sentencing in Washington State. Sentences are handed out under a determinant system, which is designed to provide equivalent sentencing for similar crimes. This type of system ensures that criminals across the state are treated uniformly when sentenced. Under the current system, criminals who are sentenced to terms of one year or less serve their time in county facilities whereas longer sentences are served in state facilities. Given the current state sentencing system, we examined whether rates of jail and prison usage in Washington counties are similar.

Methodology

This analysis uses 2003 data from the Sentencing Guidelines Commission including the number of sentences and average sentence length by offense type and county. In order to create the comparison, we determine the total number of months sentenced by each county and divide the total by the number of persons 18 to 39 years old in the county. Eighteen to 39 year olds are used for the analysis, because they have the highest rate of criminal offenses.



Findings

In Figure 1, the prison months sentenced per 1,000 persons 18 to 39 for each county is compared to the prison months sentenced statewide. The differences are displayed on the map. Southwest Washington counties tend to have the highest rates of prison months sentenced per 1,000 persons 18 to 39. Many rural eastern Washington counties also have prison months sentencing rates higher than the statewide level with Columbia and Garfield rates exceeding the state level by 75 person months per 1,000 residents 18 to 39. King County and all counties north to the Canadian border on the west side of the Cascade Mountains are below the state rate.

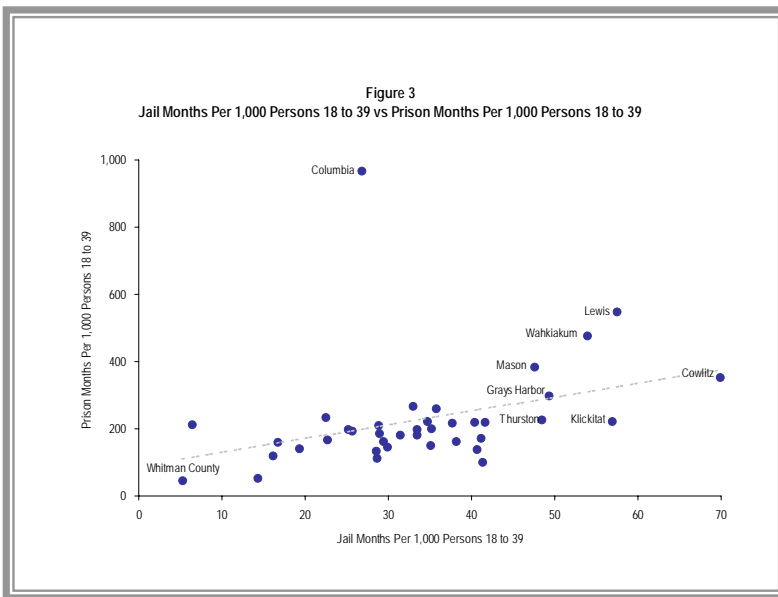
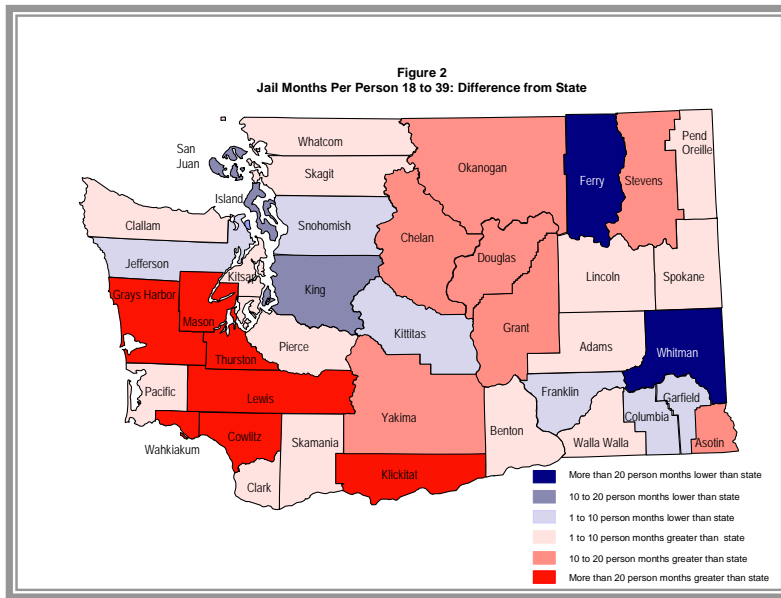


Figure 2 is similar to Figure 1 except that the data represent the jail months sentenced per 1,000 persons 18 to 39 years old for each county. Similar patterns of sentencing are evident. Southwest Washington has higher rates of jail months sentenced as occurred with the prison data. Many rural eastern Washington counties also have jail month sentence rates higher than the state. The counties with the highest prison usage also tend to have higher levels of jail usage (See Figure 3).

The prison months sentenced per 1,000 persons 18 to 39 can be decomposed into two parts to determine whether the pattern illustrated in Figure 1 is the result of different rates of sentencing or differing lengths of sentences. If we calculate the percent that each county's rate of sentencing differs from the mean rate of sentencing for all counties and also calculate the percent that each county's average sentence length differs from the overall sentence length, then we can calculate the standard deviation¹ of the percent difference for each component for a direct comparison.

For this study, prison months sentenced per 1,000 persons 18 to 39 (M_i) in a county, i , is the product of the average sentence length for the county (X_i) and the number of sentences per 1,000 persons 18 to 39 in the county (Y_i): $M_i = X_i * Y_i$. Each county's average

sentence length differs from the statewide mean average sentence by a percentage (p_{xi}), and its number of sentences per 1,000 persons 18 to 39 differs from the statewide mean rate by a percentage (p_{yi}). The prison months sentenced per 1,000 persons for a county can therefore be written as $M_i = \mu_x(1+p_{xi}) * \mu_y(1+p_{yi})$. The percentage differences from the mean statewide values are isolated and their standard deviations calculated. Using this methodology, the standard deviation for the average length of sentence is .21391 and for the rate of sentencing is .61109. The rate of sentencing, therefore, explains more of the difference in the prison months sentenced per 1,000.

¹ Standard deviation is a statistical measure of the dispersion of data values.

Conclusions

In Washington State, counties with the highest rates of prison usage also tend to have the highest rates of jail usage. Counties in southwestern Washington are particularly high on both measures. In an effort to better understand the pattern of usage, we examined the components used in calculating prison usage by county, the number of sentences per 1,000 persons 18 to 39 years of age and the average sentence length. Based on the analyses, we found that the pattern results from differing rates of sentencing rather than the length of sentences. Additional analyses are needed to determine whether sentencing for certain types of crime are responsible for the variation in rates across counties.
